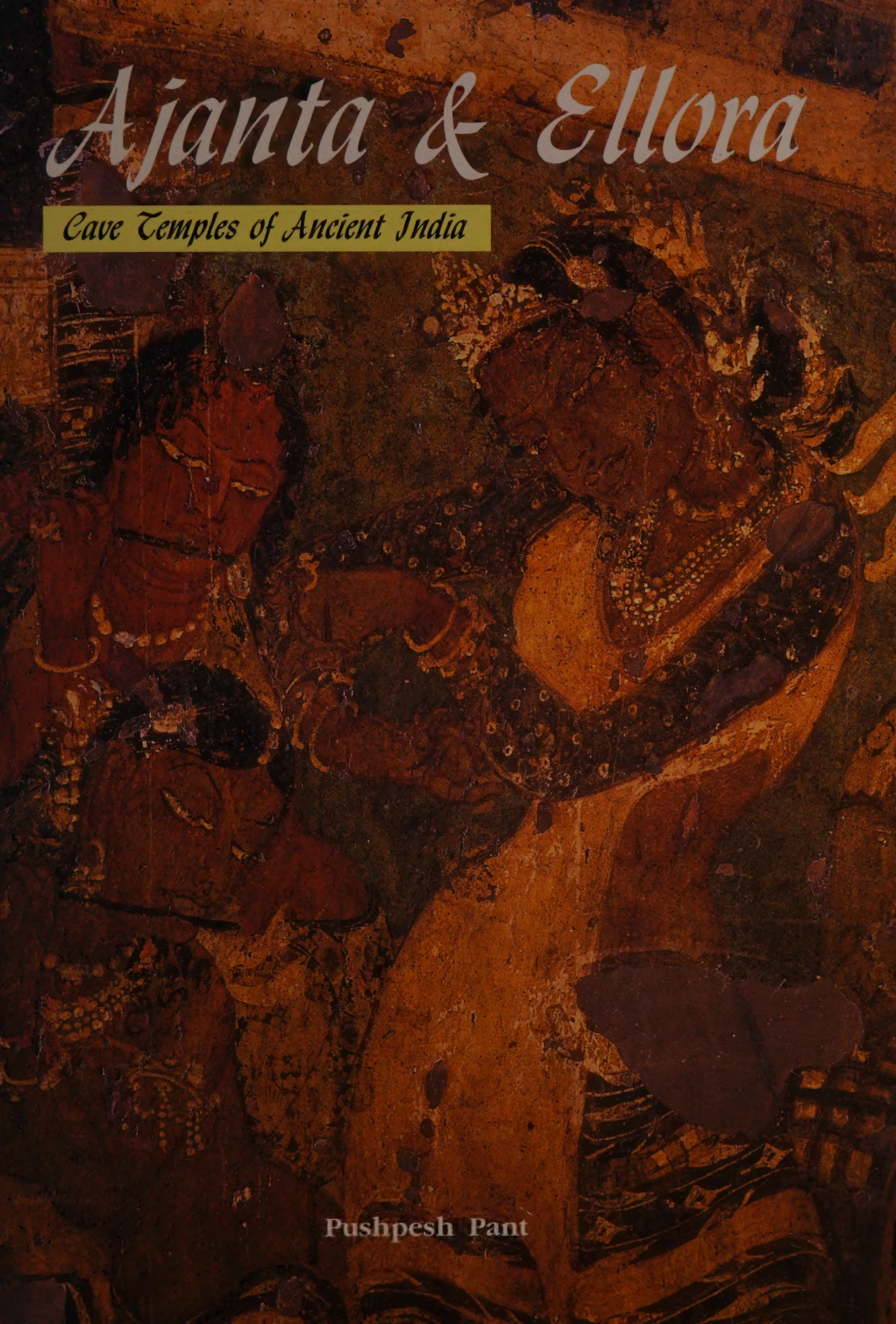
Ajanta & Ellora

Cave Temples of Ancient India



Pushpesh Pant

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Ajanta and Ellora

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Cave Temples of Ancient India

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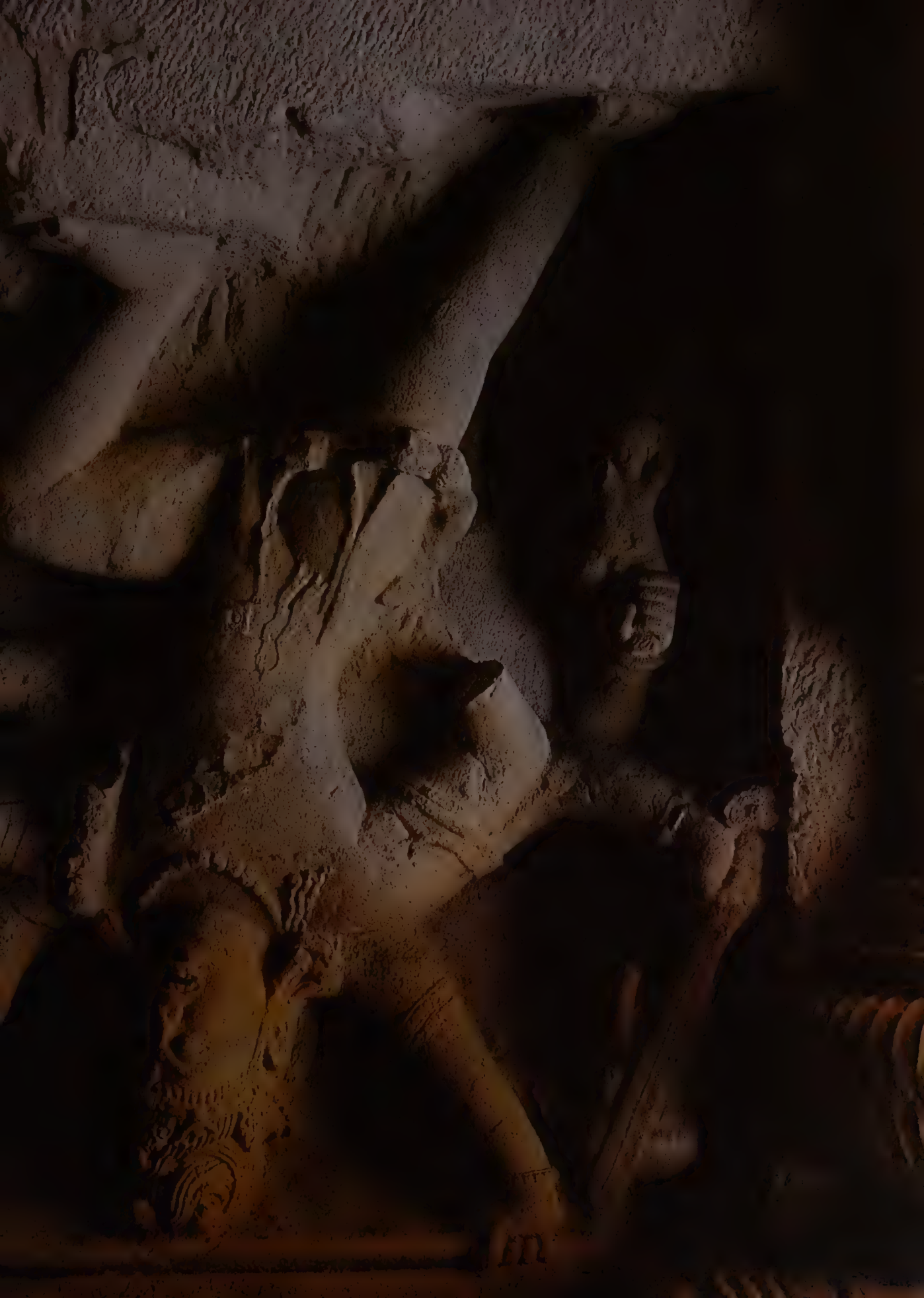

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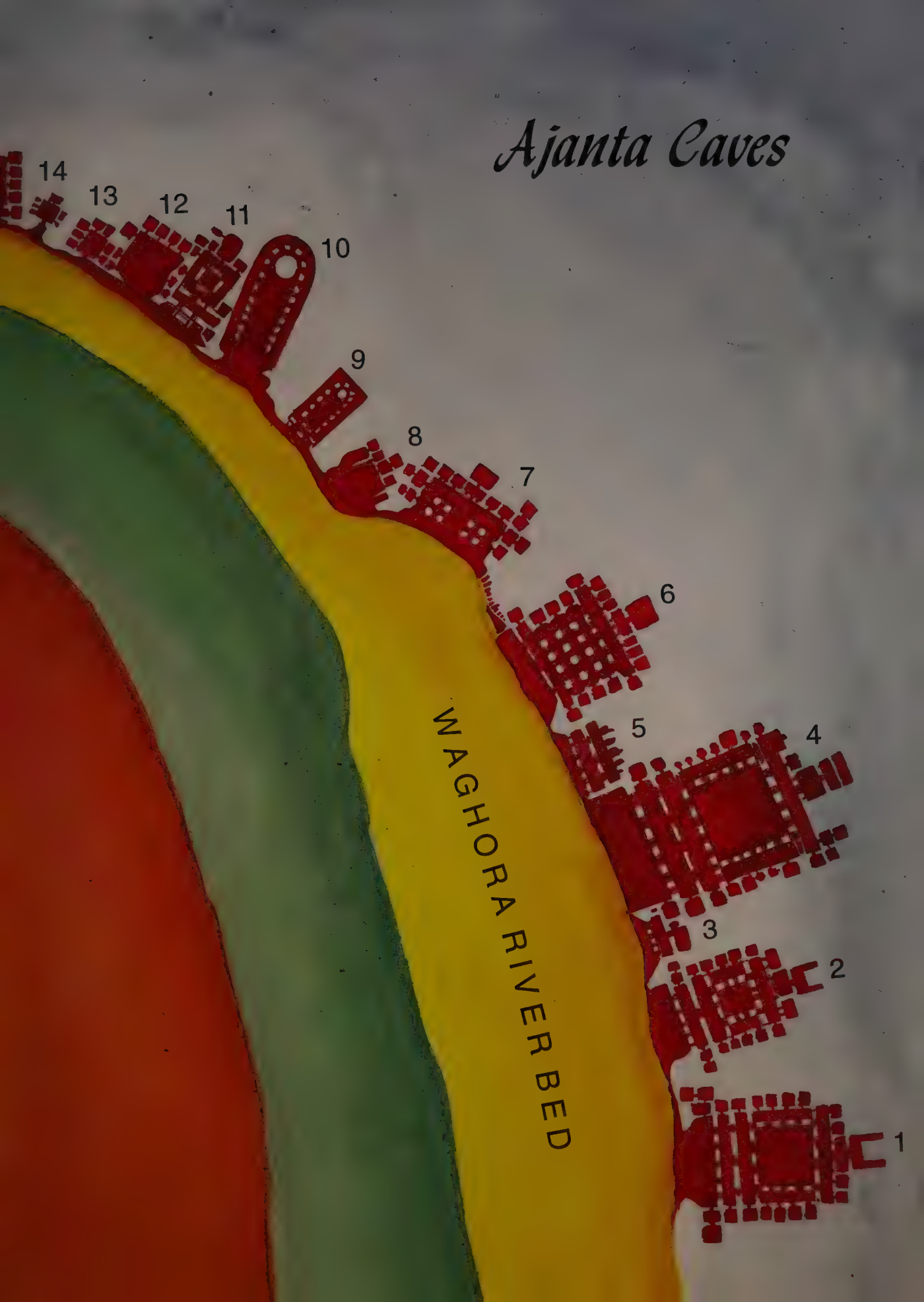
Ajanta Caves
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INTRODUCTION

The magnificent caves of Ajanta and Ellora have intrigued scholars of religion and art history. Why were they commissioned? Surely the accomplished craftsmen who executed this project could build more conventional edifices. The answer has to be sought at different levels. The substance of the rock itself exerted a compelling influence on the minds of men.

Since time immemorial, natural cavities in rocks have provided shelter for primitive man, and planned excavations were the natural next step. The dark chamber, deep inside, symbolised the security of the womb, and some scholars suggest that this unconscious drive may have strengthened the impulse to carve out caves enthusiastically. Of course, the solitude provided by these caves was incomparable. Several scholars have tried to explain the preference for caves. A cave is a good dwelling place—one that is easy to keep warm in winter, while it is always cool in summer and does not need much maintenance. However, it is clear that it was not only practical considerations that contributed to the popularity of cave shrines in ancient India.

It is in the Deccan that India makes its most original contribution to the language of form and here too the Indian artist succeeded in projecting the totality of a people's ideals, a feeling of the community shared by the entire society. Within the deliberately limited horizon of a cave, the recluse could strive to enhance his consciousness enveloped by sumptuous vistas of form and colour, all vibrating ceaselessly.

Buildings rise in a sequence, segment by segment; from the foundations there is a visible tension between gravity and soaring tensile strength. Caves, on the other hand, involve a plunging down and are chiselled down from the ceiling—there is an invisible but sensed resistance. To enter an Indian cave temple is to experience a relaxation of physical tension in response to the density of the rock facilitating the mood of surrender.

Facing page: *The painters at Ajanta delighted in rendering the human figure. They balanced the ideal figure prescribed in the artistic canon with the appropriate expression to evoke the desired emotion: detail from* Shankpala Jataka. *Cave 1, Ajanta.*

The structure and ornamentation of the cave shrines were deliberately designed to heighten the spiritual mood and enhance the visionary experience. The brilliant paintings were never meant to be clinical descriptions of reality. Their prime purpose was to sharpen the perception of a transcendent mode suggestive of the states of consciousness achieved through meditation, or ecstatic vision. The aesthetics are akin to the yogic discipline of seeking to evolve a witnessing consciousness.

The art of the cave sanctuaries is a luminous representation of Maya, a creative illusion in all its depths of multiple meaning. What the artists have wrought are microcosmic imitations of the macrocosmic dream.

In India, like in all other ancient civilizations, religion has inspired sculptors and painters, and their work reflects the spiritual quest directing the creative impulse. In the earliest phase—in the pre-Buddhist period—art was chiefly concerned with nature worship. The relief work at Sanchi and Barhut testifies to the prevalence of animistic cults. This art is essentially pagan, purely representative and realistic in technique.

It is futile to distinguish between Brahmanic and Buddhist art at this stage. Animistic tradition and Brahmanic art were adapted for their own purpose by the Buddhists. The Bodhisattvas (evolving Buddhas of compassion who defer their own salvation to relieve the sufferings of other beings)—Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya—were perhaps evolved from Brahma and Indra in their sculptural representations. The forms of both were stereotyped in the earliest examples of the Gandhara school. It is this sensuous, animistic spirit which permeates Ajanta and Ellora. Buddhist and Hindu anecdotes are not only illustrated for decorative purposes but effectively interpreted.

Whether it is the monasteries and assembly halls in caves or imposing monolithic temples, there is remarkable assimilation of diverse influences and uniformity of motifs and designs. Techniques and methods of construction were obviously the same. Subsequent development of Indian painting and sculpture, in both theme and technique, displays the indelible imprint and influence of Ajanta and Ellora.

AJANTA

Ajanta lies at a distance of 100 kilometers from Aurangabad in the heart of the Deccan plateau—the oldest land mass in the Indian subcontinent. The spot is secluded and the marvellous caves have been excavated on a perpendicular rock face rising up from the curving Waghora river, hidden from public view by a thick jungle.

A vast majority of the 1,200 odd rock-cut temples in India are located in the western part of peninsular India. This concentration of temples is explained both by the ancient trade routes as well as by the availability of basaltic trap rock suitable for carving. Interestingly, rock architecture began not in western India but in the eastern region. Emperor Ashok (270-230 BC), the greatest of the Mauryas, was the first to commission their excavation. The earliest caves were scooped out in the Barabar hills near Gaya and gifted to Ajivika and Jaina saints. The activity was taken up in western India around the second century BC. The first phase continued up to the second century AD and represents the exertions of the patrons of Hinayana (the early school of Buddhism which charted the lesser career to salvation). Buddha, the great master, is represented during this period with a symbol—a *stupa* (literally, burial mound), an umbrella, an empty throne, the Bodhi tree or the sandals.

From the second to the sixth century AD, adherents of Mahayana (the later school of Buddhism, also called the Greater Vechicle) patronised this work. The Buddha could now be shown in a human form and it is this period that Ajanta celebrates so gloriously. The Hindus took to building cave temples in the early sixth century AD at Jogeshwari near Bombay, and at the port city of Elephanta, later shifting to Ellora. The Jainas followed in their wake in the ninth century AD. After flourishing for over a thousand years, this art form lost its popularity, perhaps with the advent of structural temples.

Previous pages 20-21: *Bird's-eye view of the Ajanta Caves.*
Facing page 22: *Buddha in* abhaya mudra*—the protective gesture. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

Although the caves at Ajanta were dug out over a period of six centuries, most of those representing the Mahayana phase—those decorated more lavishly and with a profusion of human figures—were excavated between circa 465 AD and 500 AD. In fact, most of this was accomplished during the reign of a single

The gateway set in rock face with the typical horseshoe window to let in sunlight and allow those working on the stone to enter into its bowels.

Vakataka king, Harishena (AD 460-478). He is the one referred to as the 'moon among princes' in the inscription found in cave 17 at Ajanta. The Vakatakas were a Brahmin dynasty whose main branch had established a matrimonial alliance with the imperial Guptas (4th-6th century AD). Ajanta, however, is the achievement of the Bassim branch which had begun to outshine the main line by the fifth century AD. Although the king himself was not a Buddhist, many of his ministers and rich merchants were followers of Buddhism.

Panel showing the famous Bodhisattva with lotus in his hand—Padmapani Avalokiteshvara with devotees and the Dark Princess. This panel shows many interesting 'episodes' from the Mahajanaka Jataka. *The pageant of life unfolds before our eyes as we stand before this procession of princes and paupers. This masterpiece of Indian art seems to pulsate with life and manages to retain enough dramatic tension to mesmerise the onlooker. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

He himself seems to have been more than merely tolerant, in fact much inclined and sympathetic to the new faith which had by now ceased to be severely ascetic. Another inscription at Ajanta refers to the cave residences of the monks 'affording enjoyment of well known comforts in all seasons'.

A Gift to the Gods

It seems that the construction activity was spurred on by a strong competitive spirit amongst the donors. There are interesting references in various inscriptions at Ajanta which support this view. Lines inscribed in cave 26 state: 'Even the gift of a flower is the cause of a fruit called heaven and final beatitude.' The same inscription also states: 'A man continues to enjoy himself in paradise as long as his memory is green in this world. Why should not one therefore set up a memorial in the mountains that will endure as long as the moon and sun shine in the skies?' An inscription in cave 17 mentions with pride the expenditure incurred which the poor cannot envisage. A self-satisfied donor describes his gift as a palace of gods, brilliantly radiant like the crown of Indra. Experts have opined that some 25 major and minor caves were dug out and painted within the span of a single generation.

This perhaps explains why there is such diversity. The activity was intense and countless artisans were deployed under the supervision of different masters, architects and artists.

It has been suggested that the decline in the political fortunes of the Vakataka dynasty explains why so many caves remained unfinished. The Vakatakas suffered defeat and erosion of power under the weak son of Harishena. Signs of haste and confusion are transparent in the last specimens at Ajanta. Repetitive images replace the earlier imaginative work and a decline in artistic vitality as well as spiritual concerns is discernible. The caves are smaller and the treatment summary. When Harishena's son fled his capital, the empire disintegrated. The end was abrupt.

Although much scholarly attention has been focused on Ajanta, it has been rightly observed that experts can classify and analyse tirelessly but they cannot explain the magic. For the artist monks of Ajanta, all beauty was one, just as all life was one. Ajanta is the place where one may stand with an undistracted mind and share in the wonderful celebration of life free from habitual bondage of passions and ideas. Adjectives seem useless here. The effort to date and label is futile. What is called for, and is most rewarding, is to surrender the self before the sublimation of art, an intense involvement with dignified human existence, even if it is ephemeral and evanescent.

Facing page: *Palace scene showing a prince in a pose of 'Regal Relaxation' with his consort. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

The Discovery

The scarlet-coated subaltern was beginning to get dispirited. The tiger hunt had become unexpectedly tedious. The Englishman had been out in the sun too long and was wondering whether there were any tigers around. As he pushed away some foliage, a flash of yellow and red caught his eye. This was no tiger. The afternoon sun was being reflected from inside a cave. As he stepped inside a dark cavern, a spell-binding panorama unfolded before his eyes—beautifully chiselled walls adorned with a series of exquisite paintings, all dazzlingly colourful.

More than 175 years have since passed but the world has not ceased to marvel at the glorious masterpieces that have survived at Ajanta.

The Englishman was the first foreigner to set eyes upon the cave cathedrals since the days of the famous Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsang, who had passed through these parts during the reign of Emperor Harshvardhana in the seventh century. Chronicling his travels in Mo-ha-la-cha (Maharashtra) he had written of a monastery 'the base of which was in dark defile, and its lofty halls and deep chambers were quarried in the cliff and rested on the peak and laced the ravine. Within the establishment was a large temple about a hundred feet high housing a stone image of Buddha seventy feet high . . . on the walls were depicted scenes from Buddha's life and his incarnations as Bodhisattvas . . . the gates of the monastery were guarded by gigantic elephants carved in stone.' The elephants mentioned by the Chinese traveller can be seen at the base of the steps in cave sixteen.

Sir James Alexander published a brief account of these caves in the Transaction of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1834, some 15 years after the

rediscovery, and sought to draw public attention to them. However, there was no follow-up and another decade passed when, in 1843, James Fergusson, the pioneer of studies on ancient Indian architecture, visited the site. He was more persuasive than his predecessors and succeeded in arousing the interest of the directors of the East India Company, who soon appointed Major Robert Gill of the Madras Army to copy the paintings. This gentleman persevered for over two decades to accomplish the entrusted task, only briefly interrupting it due to the upheaval caused by the 1857 mutiny. Over a hundred paintings were sent by him to England and displayed at the Crystal Palace Exhibition. Unfortunately, most of these were destroyed in a fire in 1860.

In 1875, Mr Griffiths, the principal of the Bombay School of Arts, took up the task of restoring the work of Major Gill. He led a team of students who worked tirelessly, and after ten years of labour sent 125 facsimile copies of the paintings to England. Once again the copies so painstakingly made were destroyed in a fire. It was as if fate was conspiring to keep the treasure hidden. The indomitable Mr Griffiths was not one to give up easily. He managed to publish a monumental book from the copies that had escaped destruction. *Paintings in the Buddhist Caves at Ajanta* was printed in 1896.

This publication inspired Lady Herringham to visit Ajanta in 1906-7, and so charmed she was by what she saw that she made repeated trips between 1908-11 to make extensive copies for use in her book, *Ajanta Frescoes.* The work of making copies was continued by the talented Indian artist, Mukul Dey. All this activity prompted the Nizam, in whose territories Ajanta was situated, to establish a Department of Archaeology. With the assistance of Sir John Marshall, the Director General of Archaeology in the Government of India, the services of an Italian expert, Lorenzo Cecconi, were secured to adopt adequate measures for conservation. In subsequent years the task was performed skilfully by Gulam Yezdani, the Indian Director of the Archaeological Department. This proficient man deserves the credit for giving a proper introduction of the cave paintings to the world outside and for taking steps to preserve them.

The Technique

The caves at Ajanta were not blindly dug out cavities in rock. Those who fashioned them had conceived these shrines in great detail, much as a modern architect would. The special technique employed shows unmistakably that there was a grand design which incorporated even the minute detail of ornamentation.

The first step was to prepare the rock face. After selecting a suitable horizontal layer of stone, a large arch-shaped window was marked out. This horseshoe-shaped opening has become the most recognised aspect of the Ajanta facade. After ensuring that the thickness and the texture were right, the artists got down to work. The window marked in outline was dug out. The rubble scooped was utilised to fill the fore court. This window allowed the stone-cutters entry to the bowels of hard rock. It must have involved back-breaking labour. As the cavity increased, the ceiling was hollowed and the columns, which were to be finished as pillars, marked out. These also served to divide the hall into aisles.

Patiently wielding pick-axes, the builders progressed downwards. One great advantage of this modus operandi was that hazardous and cumbersome scaffoldings could be dispensed with. An interesting feature of the constructional activity at Ajanta was that the decoration of the pillars, architraves, and the like, was done simultaneously with the scooping out of stone. The same workmen who shaped the monolithic pillars decorated them and adorned the walls with exquisite sculptures.

Scholars have pointed out that the windows used to remove the rubble served another purpose—the dim interiors were lit by sunlight reflected through metallic mirrors pointed at these apertures. The *stupa*-encasement preserving the sacred relic was placed right in front of this window. The window being the only source of illumination, the *chaitya* (a burial mound but also temple) hall was suffused with a soft twilight ambience which greatly enhanced the mystic atmosphere. In course of time the horseshoe-shaped window evolved into an elegant ornament, the most striking feature of the facade.

Facing page: Bhikkhu *at the palace door—detail from* Mahajanaka Jataka. *Cave 1, Ajanta.*

Many a time the paintings at Ajanta are referred to as frescoes. This description is not quite correct as frescoes are executed when the plaster on the wall is wet. The murals here were obviously done when the plaster was dry.

The surface of the stone was first prepared by coating it with potter's clay, mixed variously with cow dung, straw and animal hair. Once this was levelled to a thickness of half an inch to two inches, it was coated with a smooth, fine, white lime plaster which became the actual painting surface. On the still damp wall, the artist first laid out his composition with a cinnabar line and then defined the subjects with an undercoat of grey or terre-verte. This was followed by the addition of local colours, and once the whole wall was completely coloured, a brown or black line re-stated the drawing to finish the composition. A last burnishing with a smooth stone gave a rich, lustrous surface. The colours, which were natural and water soluble, consisted of purple, brown, yellow, blue, white, green, red and black. The dyes used were of vegetable and mineral origin—ochre, lime, lamp black, lapis lazuli.

An interesting feature of these paintings is that they are not divided by frames. Different scenes depicted here blend beautifully into one another. The minor figures and the decorative patterns are skilfully utilised to direct the attention of the observer to the central figure in the painting. It has also been noted and pointed out that there is no perspective in these paintings; however, an illusion of depth is created by placing the figures in the background a little higher than those in the foreground. The effect is quite dramatic—characters seem about to step out to meet the observer.

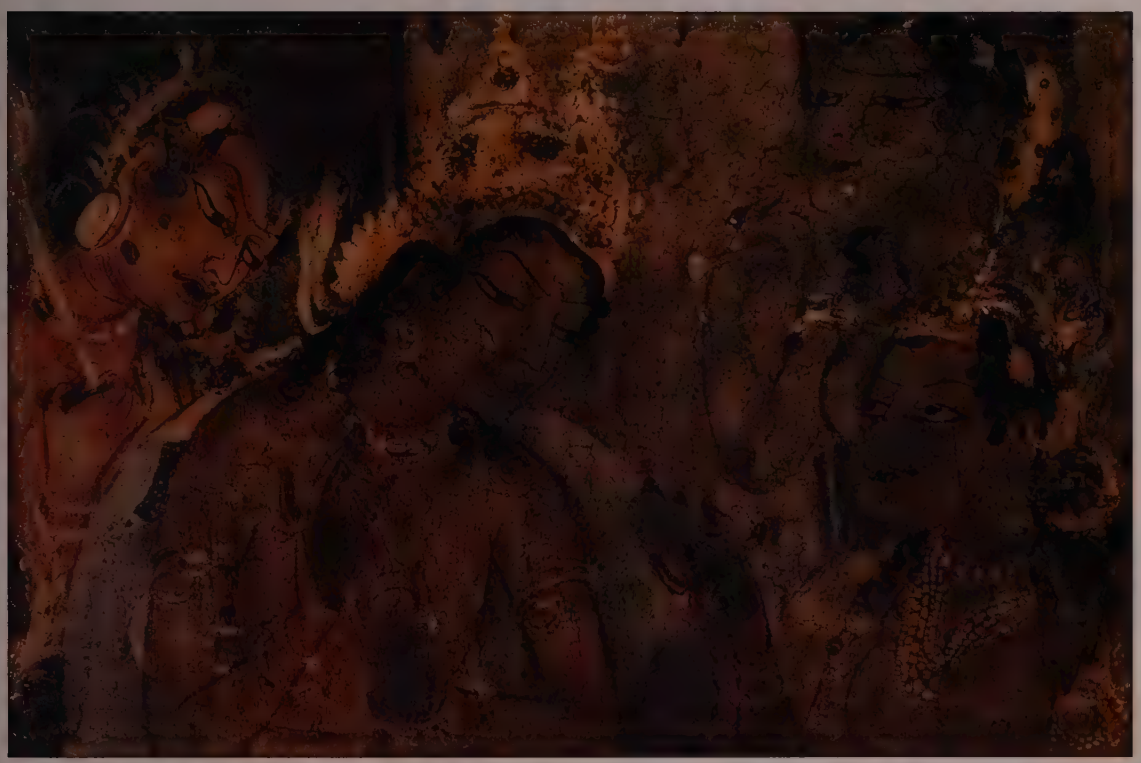
Experts have pointed out that there is no discernible evolution of style. Slight differences may be explained by personal tastes of the craftsmen and individual, stylistic or technical preferences. Many themes are repeated from one cave to another.

A scene from the Champeya Jataka *which narrates the story of the Bodhisattva in a previous birth as a snake king on the bank of the river Champa. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

The Themes

The subject matter of the paintings, as of most of the surviving examples from Ajanta, relates to the various lives and incarnations of the Buddha, told in the *Jataka* tales. As in Flemish Renaissance paintings, the stories are richly depicted in the settings of the artist's world. The whole mood is one of life and activity, and a calligraphic line gives a flowing action to the contours of the figures, whose hands are most expressive.

The paintings may be classified into portraits, narrative illustrations and decorative ornamentation of great variety. Portraits are of the great religious teacher Buddha, and other personalities associated with him; narrative illustrations, too, are related to the *Jataka* tales—fables that recount the many earlier births of Buddha—when the great teacher was a Bodhisattva. In many of these parables the Buddha manifests himself as an animal or a bird. A number of *Jataka* stories take a metaphorical reference from Hindu mythology and embroider it suitably. To appreciate these pictures fully, we have to be acquainted with the story of the Buddha's life and the legends associated with his work.



Mahajanaka conversing with Queen Shivali—detail from the court scene. This Jataka *deals with the twin themes of temptation and renunciation. Shivali tried in vain to persuade her husband to give up asceticism. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

Prince Siddhartha was the son of Shuddhodhana, a king ruling over a republican tribe—the Sakyas—in eastern India six centuries before the birth of Christ. Siddhartha was a precocious child and brooded constantly. His worries dealt with the purpose of life and the existence of misery. He did not play in the carefree manner of other boys of his age. This distressed his parents. His father tried to divert his attention by arranging a variety of amusements. When this failed, the king sought to isolate his sensitive son from the sorrowful sights of the world in the hope that the adolescent would be cured of his melancholy.

This was not to be. Young Siddhartha encountered on different occasions an old feeble man, a sick person writhing in pain and a dead body being taken for cremation. These sights agitated him greatly. He could not help wondering why one should live if one has to inevitably grow old and infirm, if one cannot escape illness, and if one day all living beings have to depart from earth. Then he saw a mendicant who had given up the world. The *sanyasi* did not seem to be touched by worries about old age, illness or death. Siddhartha decided to become a *sanyasi.*

Siddhartha's parents had, meanwhile, arranged for him to be married to a beautiful princess, Yashodhara. Although a son (Rahul) was born to him, domestic bliss was not the lot of the Sakya prince. One night when his wife was asleep, Siddhartha walked out of the palace and renounced the world. This incident is called the *Mahabhinishkramana.* The word may be translated loosely as 'the great going away'.

For many years Siddhartha wandered, seeking the right teacher. He undertook severe austerities while residing in dangerous forests to liberate himself from ignorance and family ties. He

subjected his body to extremes of pain and deprivations of all kinds. Finally, while sitting under the banyan tree at Gaya, true knowledge dawned on him. This famous achievement of the release from bondage and the attainment of enlightenment is known as *nirvana*. After this, Siddhartha became famous as the *buddha*—one who has become supremely knowledgeable. The Buddha realised that there was no point in torturing one's self. In his discourses, he compared the human body to a string of the musical instrument, the *veena*. If the string is slack, it cannot produce music; tightened too much, it can only break. To his followers he gave the advice of moderation. The path shown by him is rightly called the middle path—*madhya marga*.

Soon after attaining *nirvana*, the Buddha moved to Sarnath near Varanasi, a holy place of pilgrimage for Hindus. There, in a deer park, he delivered his first sermon. This landmark in his life is termed the Turning of the Wheel of Law—*Dharma Chakra Pravartan*. The Buddha began to travel throughout the length and breadth of India. His charismatic personality attracted countless followers. He did not philosophise like the erudite Brahmins; he talked to common people in their idiom. And most important of all, he addressed himself to the concerns of common people. The Buddha shared his knowledge, speaking straight from the heart. Why is there suffering? The root cause, he believed, is desire—*trishna*—yearning for things or persons. All misery is explained once this is understood. Union with unpleasant, undesirable beings and things is painful. Separation from loved things and persons is painful. Old age and illness are painful because they render us dependent on others. So how do we overcome suffering and misery? The solution the Buddha prescribed was logical. We must overcome desire—check it. He suggested the eight-fold path encompassing a simple ethical code of conduct—right thinking, right seeing, right contemplation, right exercise, right aspiration, right speech, right livelihood and right conduct, as a means of controlling desire.

The Buddha became immensely popular in his lifetime and laid the foundation for the propagation of the Dharma or faith. He renounced all claims of godhood and warned his followers against idol worship. This is the reason that the Buddha was represented only symbolically in the initial phase when the Hinayana school of Buddhism was dominant.

Even in the later depictions of the Buddha, symbolism played an important role, especially in terms of the gestures depicted, either in painting or sculpture. The movement or the position of our hands is highly significant for our mental or emotional attitude. The Sanskrit word *mudra*, therefore, signifies much more than a casual gesture of the hand: it denotes a spontaneous expression of our deeper consciousness, even though we may not normally be aware of it. It is the 'seal' or the visible imprint of our mind that characterises the flow and the direction of our consciousness.

The main *mudras* seen in Buddha images are not only based on an accepted conventional code—which would be valid only within a certain tradition and within the frame of a particular cultural or racial environment—but are of a nature that can be universally understood and accepted. They are based on the knowledge and experience of general human psychology.

The first gesture of the Buddha under the tree of Enlightenment was the touching of the earth *(bhumisparsha mudra)*, calling the earth to witness the event. The earth here symbolises the past, which is as old as the world, in which he had practiced innumerable acts of renunciation which had enabled him to gain Enlightenment. The earth is not only the symbol of the past, but of all beings living in this world who have to accept this world in its present aspect as the firm basis and starting point for further development or their final liberation. Without recognising and understanding the past and the world in which we live, we cannot free ourselves from its bondage. We become free not through rejection or aversion, but through knowledge, through understanding and acceptance of things as they are, in their true nature. This is the first aspect of meditation, represented by the Meditation (*dhyani*) Buddha, Aksobhya, the pure awareness of things as they are and the awareness of being conscious of them and of ourselves. The stilling of the mind, therefore, is the first step in meditation, and this stilling is possible only if we recognise the firm ground of our present position and the world in which we live. We have created this world through our own past, insofar as the latter determines that which our senses are

capable of perceiving and experiencing. Thus, the touching of the earth is the recognition of our past in the mirror of our present consciousness, and the firmer we take our stand on this 'earth', the more perfectly can we reflect the light of 'heaven', the universality of the mind.

The palm of the hand that is touching the earth is turned inward and therefore relates to our inner centre. The outward turned palm establishes communication with others. It indicates both an opening of ourselves towards others and an outflowing of psychic force.

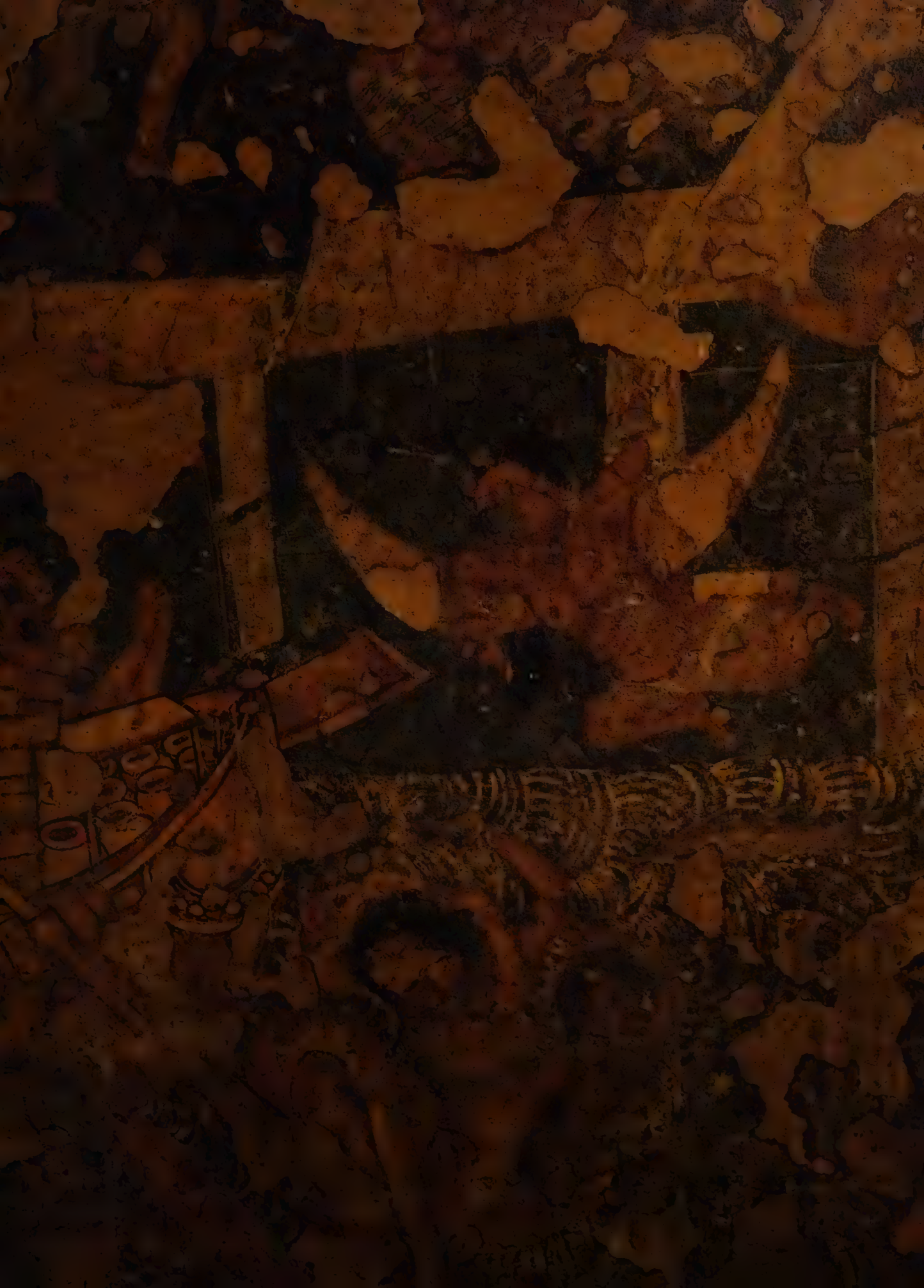
The turning of the palm outward in the reversal of the earth-touching gesture constitutes, therefore, a complete reversal of the conscious attitude, namely, the change from the cool, detached and uninvolved 'objective' observer to the warm and profoundly caring attitude of one who not only recognises and realises the unity of all life, but feels involved in all its forms, sharing the joys and sorrows of other beings, and thus giving himself in love and compassion to all beings.

This was the attitude of the Buddha after his Enlightenment when, instead of enjoying the bliss of emancipation all by himself and entering into the final state of *parinirvana* (the state of *Nirvana* or Enlightenment, which ends or closes the cycle of rebirths) he returned to the world, taking its suffering upon himself again, in order to share his great vision and his liberating knowledge with his fellow beings. Thus, he gave to the world not only his teaching, but himself, his complete life. This is symbolised in the gesture of giving (*danamudra*) which expresses the Wisdom of Equality, or the essential oneness of all life, embodied in the form of the Dhyani Buddha Ratnasambhava, whose right hand is stretched across his knee with the palm turned outward and his fingertips almost touching the earth.

Mahajanaka Jataka. *The panel shows the prince reluctant to lead a life of idle pleasure and his wife's attempts to lure him away from the monastic path with music and dance. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

The most general attitude of meditation, in which all levels of the mind are engaged, is represented by the Dhyani Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, who embodies the Wisdom of Distinguishing Inner Vision. Both his hands, with palms turned upward, rest upon the soles of his upturned feet, the active right hand upon the passive left hand. The upward turned palms, so characteristic of this gesture of

Following pages 34-35: *The Shipwreck—such unfortunate mishaps were meant to inspire the viewers to cultivate a balanced view of life. Cave 1, Ajanta.*



meditation *(dhyana-mudra),* signify a receptivity toward the eternal qualities and force of the universe. The palms are like open bowls, ready to receive the gifts of heaven. In this gesture the body is in perfect symmetry, completely centered, balanced and relaxed.

Only out of this centered and relaxed attitude can spontaneous and selfless action be born. This is represented by the Dhyani Buddha Amoghasiddhi who embodies the Wisdom That Accomplishes All Works. His right hand, with the palm turned outward and the fingers stretched upward, is raised to the height of his shoulders in the gesture of fearlessness *(abhaya-mudra),* reassurance, and blessing. Amoghasiddhi is the embodiment of that highest freedom in which an Enlightened One moves through this world without creating new *karmic* bonds through his actions, because they are motivated by selfless love and compassion.

The passive left hand of all the four above mentioned forms of Dhyani Buddhas is always shown as resting in the lap with its palm turned upward in an open relationship to the universe (or its corresponding force within us) and is common to all stages of meditation. Besides the direction of the palms, we have to consider the three planes or levels of these gestures. The first two *mudras* are on the basic level and point toward the earth. The *Dhyana-mudra* is on the middle level, which represents 'man', in whom 'heaven' and 'earth' are united. The fourth gesture is on the universal level, where wisdom turns into spiritual action.

On this level we also find the fifth gesture, which belongs to the central Buddha of the *mandala* (a ritual or magic circle, or diagram used in invocations, meditation and temple service): Vairochana, the Radiating One, who represents the sum total of the Four Wisdoms, namely, the Universal Law. His gesture is the 'Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Law' (Dharma Chakra Mudra). In this gesture both hands are active on the level of the heart, the left hand turned inward, the right turned outward. Thus the inner and the outer worlds are united in the ultimate realisation as well as in the primordial state of universality.

With the passage of time the Buddha was incorporated into the Hindu pantheon of gods. But much before this, his followers had modified many of his teachings. Hinayana Buddhism was very spartan for the common men and women. They needed a personal bond with the teacher or liberator. The biography of Siddhartha thus became embellished with many legends.

But it would be wrong to conclude that the paintings illustrating the life of Gautama Buddha are sectarian works of art. As the famous orientalist, Prof. A. L. Basham, has remarked, 'Though painted for religious purposes, the murals of Ajanta bear a secular rather than a religious message'. Here, even more vividly than at Sanchi, we see the whole of ancient India in panorama. Here are the princes in their palaces, ladies in their harems, coolies with loads slung over their shoulders, beggars, peasants and ascetics, together with all the many beasts and flowers of India. Art historian Rothenstein has very perceptively observed, 'On the hundred walls and pillars of these rock carved temples a vast drama moves before our eyes, a drama played by princes and sages and heroes, by men and women of every condition against a marvellously varied scene among forests and gardens, in courts and cities, on wide plains and in deep jungles, while above, the messengers from heaven move swiftly in the sky. From all these emanates a great joy in the unsurpassing radiance of the facade of the world, in the physical nobility of men and women, in the strength and grace of animals and loveliness and purity of birds and flowers; woven into this fabric of material beauty we see the ordered pattern of the spiritual values of the universe.' The master painters at Ajanta, it has been remarked, were in love with nature—the trees in full bloom, the profusion of animals. Their view of life was all-encompassing. Banabhatta, the famous writer during the reign of Harshvardhana, has aptly pointed out that these murals are a manifestation of the whole universe—*darshit vishvasrupa.*

The Caves

The caves at Ajanta are arranged in a horseshoe pattern on a hill overlooking the crescent curve of the Waghora river. Numbered from 1 to 29, the caves are of different types. Some are *viharas,*

Facing page: *An illustration from the* Champeya Jataka *depicting the Naga prince with his retinue. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

(halls surrounded by cubicles built for residential purposes); others are *chaityas,* assembly halls, places of ritual worship housing a *stupa,* a receptacle of some sacred relic. The early investigators of the site assigned numbers to the caves according to their sequence along the ravine's wall: obviously these numbers have no connection with their order of creation. In fact, cave 10, a *chaitya* hall, is believed to be the earliest chamber, since an inscription appears to date it to the first half of the second century BC. It also contains fragments of the oldest known examples of Indian wall paintings. It seems that not all the caves were decorated with paintings—some were never completed. In many caves the paintings have been irretrievably lost due to inclement weather. Some have suffered at the hands of vandals. Ironically, the paintings also suffered greatly at the hands of art-loving enthusiasts who sought to copy these without adequate skill and technical knowledge. At present there are only six caves where the glories of ancient Indian painting can be sampled. These are the caves numbered 1, 2, 9, 10, 16 and seventeen. Besides these, the caves numbered 6 and 7 are also of interest. Fortunately, these are representative of both the Hinayana and the Mahayana schools and date between the earliest and the latest phases of construction.

Unfortunately, most of the painted surfaces are fragmented, but in one passage the patterns are adequate and depict a royal scene from about the first century BC. A handsome raja and his retinue approach a garlanded tree. Here we are met by the easy realism of the scene. Each head has a distinct personality, and the raja is especially remarkable, not only for his good looks, but also for his stylish and elaborate hairstyle bedecked with jewels. On the right, two musicians near the sacred tree on the top row hold long-stemmed trumpets, while below are two dancers with exuberant gestures and expressive eyes. The general format of these first paintings appears to indicate that they formed a continuous narration, within a narrow ribbon-like band along the wall, reminiscent of Chinese scroll paintings.

The temptation of Buddha by Mara, the evil one and the god of death. Mara tried to tempt and later terrify Prince Siddhartha while he practised austerities. The young ascetic remained steadfast in his resolve to gain supreme knowledge and annihilated Mara. Cave 1, Ajanta.

Later paintings at Ajanta expanded in all directions to cover the whole surface of the wall, but the continuous narrative concept was retained and the resulting complexity immediately imbues the paintings of Ajanta with a crowded, throbbing vitality. The sequence is only interrupted occasionally by an architectural structure or a series of strange 'cubistic' forms which provide

barriers between separate actions and even function occasionally as props for random figures. It is clear that the paintings in cave 10, though they are the earliest examples of Indian painting that we know, had been preceded by an extended tradition, and considering the excellence of this lone example, that tradition's loss can only be lamented. Cave 1 dates back to the sixth century AD. It has many exquisitely carved pillars with shafts of varying shapes and designs. The central panels and the capitals are adorned with relief carvings. One of the bracket panels displays the 'Temptation of Buddha'. As Gautama sat in *vajrasan*—the posture indicating firm resolve—he was assaulted by Mara, an embodiment of evil, who resorted to great guile to tempt him and lead him astray. Mara despatched his beautiful daughters to seduce the young ascetic. When temptation failed, terror was attempted. But Gautama was not to be distracted. He did not lose concentration and continued with his meditation. The Enlightened One is shown in this panel with his palm touching the earth—the *bhumisparsha* gesture.

Among other characters sculptured on this panel are the *gandharva* (celestial nymphs) demigods and wild animals in combat. These elements combine to lend great dramatic tension to the scene. One can also see men and women standing under shaded trees playing musical instruments. On the pillars in the verandah and the hall, there is a great profusion of mythological creatures like serpents with many hoods and *apsaras* (nymphs). The entrance to the shrine is guarded by gatekeepers and is carved in many tiers. The other caves are not as rich in sculpture. There is a huge image of Buddha sitting in the preaching posture—the classic depiction of the *Dharma Chakra Pravartan*—Turning the Wheel of Faith. It is believed that all these sculptures were painted, though only a few retain this adornment today.

Mahajanaka Jataka. *This section from a large panel shows that the painters of these frescos were masters of complex form and could handle large groups of human figures very well.* Praman—*ideal proportion—is always in harmony with* bhava—*expression of mood. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

In cave 1—a late sixth century *vihara*—we can also see an example of Gupta architecture wrought from solid stone. The cave is a virtual museum of Buddhist art. During this period the function of the *vihara* was extended beyond its basic purpose of quartering and feeding the monks to make it also a place of worship. Here a cell in the back wall forms a shrine and contains

Following pages 40-41: *The lustration of the prince—detail from the panel depicting the* Mahajanaka Jataka. *Cave 1, Ajanta.*

an image of the Buddha. But what overwhelms us in this cave is the number and quality of the paintings which still glow from every surface, and transport us into the rich and complex Buddhist world of the late fifth century.

The sculpture representing Bodhisattva Padmapani standing languidly, holding a blue lotus, is particularly fine. The Buddha-to-be wears a few rich pieces of jewellery, such as an elaborate pointed crown, and a sacred cord which is delicately composed of many strands of small pearls. His expression of remote calm is enhanced by the figures which crowd in from all directions and establish him as an island of spiritual disengagement, unmoved and inattentive to the force and sounds of *maya* (illusion) which engulf him. The absence of shadows suggest an unworldly light appropriate not only to the subject but also to its location, deep within the rock. This light is present in all the paintings at Ajanta, and is partly the result of the techniques used by the artists.

Another elegant Bodhisattva figure in cave 1 is shown surrounded by his queen and ladies of the court. The painting recreates an episode from a *Jataka* story, *Mahajanaka Jataka,* and it also provides a vivid glimpse into the regal settings which were well known to the artist. The same keen talent for observation appears in the painting of an elephant in a lotus pond, one of many small panels decorating the ceiling. The artist has captured the huge beast at the moment when it charges ashore, scattering lotus blossoms in its wake. The elephant is but one of the hundreds of animals—horses, bulls, birds, monkeys and others—which are brightly painted throughout the caves.

It is in this cave that we come across the portrayal of the *Shivi Jataka.* This story is borrowed from the Hindu Puranic tradition. Shivi was a noble and exceptionally kind king. One day a dove pursued by a hawk sought refuge with Shivi. The bird of prey refused to give up the chase. The king understood that he could not, without any justification, deny the hunter his meal. He resolved the problem by offering the hawk a portion of his own flesh equal to the small bird's weight. The story of Shivi must have appealed to the Buddhist monks for the emphasis it puts on compassion and self-sacrifice.

On another wall in this cave are the paintings describing events from the *Mahajanaka Jataka.* Mahajanaka was a king with strong spiritual inclinations. Several attempts were made to

Portico of a cave. Although the paintings in Ajanta are not divided into sections and seem to scroll on, here the pillars appear to elegantly frame the pictures. Cave 1, Ajanta.

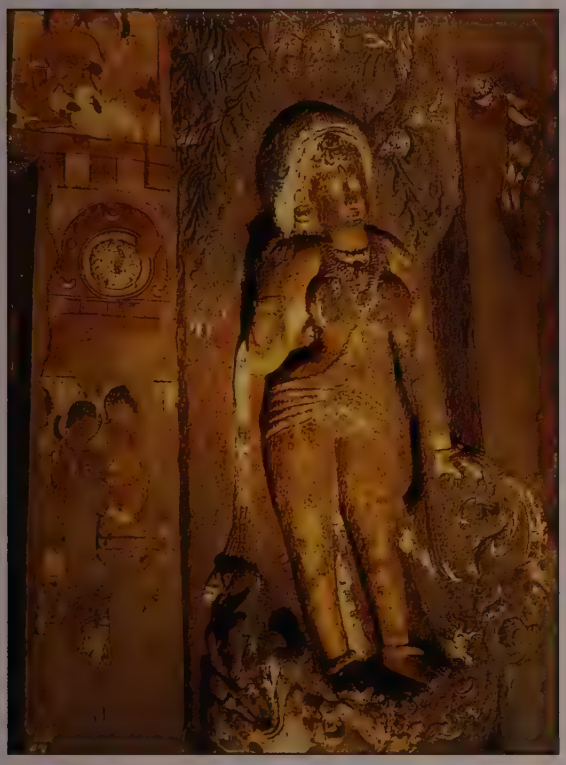
dissuade him from renouncing the world. At one place we see dancing girls and musicians striving to entice him. At another, boats are shown struggling with stormy waves and also threatened by dangerous creatures. The architrave depicts some of the sights which prompted the Buddha to renounce the world. Another attractive feature of this cave is the positioning of the gatekeepers. Five hooded snakes provide an impressive canopy for the guardians of the shrine.

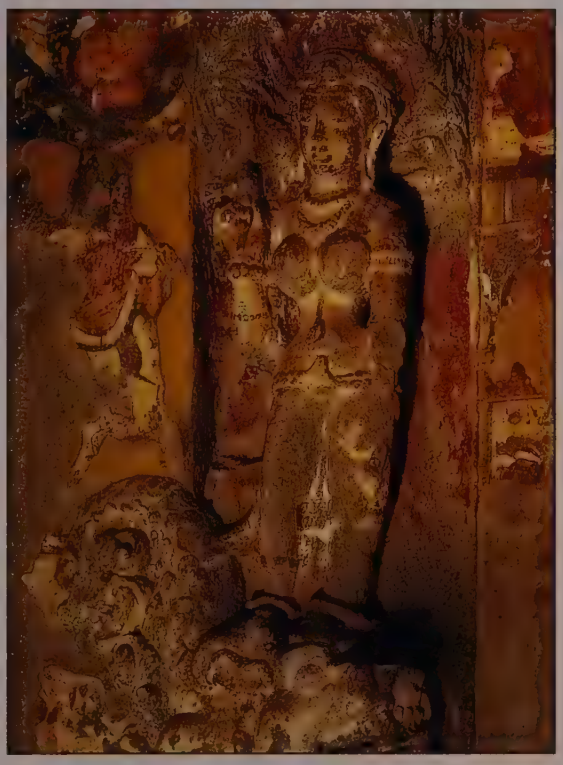
The doorways at Ajanta have received special treatment at the hands of talented artists. Not only did the gate protect the sanctity of the shrine, it was also a symbolic entrance to the sacred world beyond. Crossing the threshold was also the beginning of the journey into the inner self. Mysterious and protective forces guarded it. The portals were full of auspicious associations in goddesses, rivers, flowers and so on; at the same time some fierce figures were included to deter the faithless and the sacrilegious.

The pillars in cave 1 were, thus, decorated lavishly with figures of dwarfs, crocodiles, dragons and other animals. Intricate patterns of foliage and the figure of Ganga lend additional beauty to the gateway. The miracle of Shravasti is also portrayed in this cave. It was at Shravasti that the Buddha manifested himself in many forms to confound his opponents.

Cave 2 is smaller in size. Various compartments in this cave show Kuber, the pot-bellied god of wealth in Hindu mythology, with his *gandharva* attendants and reptiles of all kinds who are supposed to guard hidden riches. One wall is painted with the *Hansa Jataka,* the fable which recounts the Buddha's birth as a swan. The queen of Varanasi once had a dream that the Enlightened One would preach her a sermon in the form of a swan. Her consort ordered a great search to seek the divine bird. The noble swan was traced and captured with his companions. The swan converted the queen to the Noble Path and secured the release of his companions.

On another wall are painted the scenes from the *Vidura-Pandita Jataka.* This narrative, too, borrows from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata.* Vidura was the wise counsellor in the Kaurava court who was insulted and expelled by Duryodhana. In the Buddhist version, however, he is a minister at Indraprastha. He is despatched by Punnak, a *yaksha* (demigod) king, to plead his case before the Naga princess, Vimala. Curiously, having pleased the queen, Punnak





Left & right: *River Goddesses adorning the gate in cave seventeen. Statue of Ganga astride the crocodile Makara is particularly striking. These auspicious images were believed to accentuate the sanctity of the portals to the sanctum. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

The caves at Ajanta are a wonderful art gallery—the paintings on the walls illustrating the Jataka *tales with dramatic impact. Various elements of the painters' craft form, colour and emotion are expertly blended.* Rupabheda—*distinction of types and* lavanya-yojana—*embodiment of charm, are effortlessly blended. Great emphasis is put on* Sadirshya—*likeness. The pearl-bedecked coiffure—* muktajala grathitam-alakam—*of these figures has often been remarked upon by scholars. It seems that the artists had no inhibitions in adorning the walls with sensuous beauties even if the residents in these grottos had given up worldly pleasures. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

married her daughter Irandati. This young woman is shown on a swing—a famous painting.

Just below this painting is the scene from *Purnavadana,* an anecdote preserved in *Divyavdan*—an anthology of Buddhist biographies—which depicts Purna the monk saving his brother when his boat was about to capsize. Another intriguing painting shows a king with a drawn sword chastising a court dancer. Lamentably the head of the king has been obliterated due to the plaster peeling off. The utterly terrified dancer is portrayed in a pose of abject surrender.

The ceiling in the cave is partitioned by square and rectangular sections and decorated with floral and geometrical designs. Amorous couples, jugglers, animals and fruits combine to cast a powerful spell. Fantasy dominates all else. Dramatic tension is provided by wrestlers in combat and birds and animals captured in movement.

Cave 6 is interesting as it houses a large number of images of the Buddha in different poses. One of these figures, on the left wall of the antechamber, is so finely coated with lime that it appears to have been wrought of marble.

The cave is also remarkable for its decorative door jambs adorned with *mithunas* (amorous couples) and the figure of a monk shown on the left wall of the upper storey of the antechamber with three lotuses in his hand. The lotuses seem to symbolise the triple gems of Buddhism: the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the Sangha. The frieze of the elephants killing a tiger is quite attractive.

Cave 7 appears to have been a natural cavern which was converted into a monastery. There is no central hall in this monastery and it is decorated with lotuses and animal heads in the usual manner. The Buddha is shown here seated on a lion throne accompanied by attendants.

Although Ajanta is famous for its wall paintings, it is also a repository of beautifully sculpted images. Some scholars are of the view that these statues were at one time painted. Cave 2, Ajanta.

Unfortunately, most of the paintings on the wall have been lost.

Cave 9 is, perhaps, the second oldest and is dated to the first century BC. It is double-storeyed and has a balcony, a porch and an impressive sun window. The base of the window begins to taper inwards and assumes the shape of a horseshoe. The aisles have a flat roof but the

Facing page: *Interior of a cave with ornate pillars and beautifully painted ceiling. The rich manifestation of this area invites the visitor to pause and reflect before entering the shrine. Cave 2, Ajanta.*

nave has a vaulted one. The oblong hall has a *mandap* (hall in front of the sanctum sanctorum) demarcated by 21 plain pillars.

Most of the paintings in this cave have faded and one can notice that many have been painted over without obliterating earlier works. At many places it is possible to re-expose an earlier painting: devotees approaching a *stupa,* a Naga king with his retinue and Buddhist *bhikshus* or *bhikkus* (monks who rely on the alms of lay-disciples for sustenance) are portrayed here.

Cave 10 is the most ancient, dug perhaps in 150 BC. It is a most impressive structure with an entrance 10 meters high. The dimensions of the main hall are large, 28 meters by 12 meters, and 29 pillars surround the *stupa.* Lamentably, many of the paintings in this cave have been blackened by European artists who had tried to trace these on paper with the help of varnish. Still, some valuable specimens have survived. On the right wall are scenes from the *Shyama Jataka* which is a variation once again on the story of Shravan Kumar, the poor Brahmin boy, who was a most dutiful attendant for his blind and aged parents. The young lad was accidentally shot by a king whilst hunting. In this version it is Gautama in his incarnation as a Bodhisattva who is born as Shyama, the loving son. In the end he is restored to life by the gods who are happy with his devotion.

The 16th cave is quite famous. An inscription identifies the donor as Varahadev, a minister of the Vakataka king, Harishena. The benefactor has claimed in this Sanskrit inscription that he had gifted to the Sangha a residence with windows, railings, beautifully decorated pillars and a picture gallery, along with a shrine. Truly this is one of the most attractive excavations at Ajanta. A six-pillared verandah leads to the three entrances. Two beautiful windows flank the central gate. Fourteen cells surround a 20 meters square hall. Twenty pillars separate this hall from the four aisles. Sculptures on the ceiling imitate wooden beams and rafts. Ornamentation includes flying creatures, entwined couples and smiling and grimacing dwarfs. There is, in this cave, a huge image of the Buddha seated with his feet dangling. This unusual pose is known as *pralamaba-pada.*

The ceiling of the verandah is decorated with intricate geometric and floral patterns and on the inside of the architrave of the verandah are depicted the scenes from the *Mahasutsoma Jataka.* We see a man asleep and a wild animal licking his feet. According to this *Jataka,* the

Bodhisattva in Tushita heaven before his descent to earth. Cave 2, Ajanta.

Bodhisattva born as Sutsoma had redeemed the offspring of King Saudasa and a lioness from cannibalism. Other pictures show scenes from the *Hasti Jataka* when the Bodhisattva, born as a noble elephant, threw himself over a precipice to provide food for hungry travellers. Then there are the illustrations of the *Mahaummanga Jataka* in which the Bodhisattva was confronted by the challenge of pronouncing judgement in an enigmatic case where two women were claiming motherhood of one child. The tale has a striking resemblance to the Biblical fable, the Judgement of Solomon.

It is in this cave that we encounter the painting of the dying princess which has earned high praise from foreign critics. Griffiths has commented eloquently, 'For pathos and sentiment and the unmistaken way of telling its story, this picture I consider cannot be surpassed in the history of art. The Florentine could have put better drawing and the Venetian better colour, but neither could have thrown greater expression in it.' The dying princess is identified as the wife of Nanda, a half brother of Buddha. She swooned, never to recover, when she was informed that her husband had decided to become a monk.

The 17th cave follows the pattern of the preceding cave and resembles it a great deal. The pillars and pilasters are beautifully carved and the decoration on the ceiling and walls is rich. Scrolls, twisted ropes and lotus petals are the predominant motifs. There are also images of Bodhisattvas and some amorous couples. The main Buddha image is in the teaching posture and is attended by the Bodhisattvas Vajrapani and Padmapani. This cave has the best preserved collection of paintings in Ajanta. The left wall of the verandah shows a giant wheel which has been variously described as the wheel of life and the wheel of the zodiac. The wheel is divided into eight segments and the outer rim into 16 parts, each containing a symbol. The wheel is held up by a *yaksha*. The rear wall depicts Indra with *apsaras* and celestial musicians. Indra and his entourage are painted with flowing garments and the outline of their bodies merge with the clouds. The effect is quite striking. There is a powerful illusion of flight.

In this cave, some works also dating from the middle of the fifth century are preserved. Among them are several instances of a motif that was to be central to all Indian paintings, right up to the last Rajput miniatures in the 19th century—two lovers in an architectural setting.

A scene from Vidurpandita Jataka. *This* Jataka *is a Buddhist variation of the* Mahabharata *story where a noble prince is cheated of his kingdom in a game with loaded dice. Cave 2, Ajanta.*

The scene illustrates the story of Simhala Avadana and covers a complete wall. The story deals with the adventures of a virtuous merchant, Simhala, who is shipwrecked on an island inhabited by ogresses. By day the ogresses assume the forms of beautiful women, but at night they turn into cannibalistic fiends. In one detail the hero is shown in the company of one of the transformed ogresses, seated in a brightly coloured tent. A similar scene from the *Vessantara Jataka* portrays prince Vessantara being informed that he has been banished from his father's kingdom. The painting's erotic overtones, as well as its composition, link it to the *yakshis* and *yakshas*, they are ancient fertility spirits of the earth who still stand guard at the portals of the Buddha's sanctuary. The Naga king's head is dramatically enclosed within a multi-headed cobra hood which suggests a halo. It is curious to note that the throne on which this royal pair sits is decorated with a pattern of the same 'cubistic' motif that is used as 'set furniture' in the wall paintings.

Another scene shows a prince distributing alms to beggars and mendicants. This is perhaps inspired by the *Vessantara Jataka* in which the prince on banishment distributed all his wealth amongst the needy.

Epiphany of Buddhas in stone illustrating the miracle of Shravasti where the Buddha replicated himself into a thousand iridescent images and left the heretics spellbound. The images illustrate the various hand gestures—for example, contemplation, discourse, protection. Cave 7, Ajanta.

later Indian miniature painting.

Among the clearly defined fifth-century architectural details are flat, cushion-shaped capitals on columns hung with jewels. The same capital tops the stone on the left side of the porch to cave nineteen. The two figures are actually a king and one of the serpents, and like

Facing page: *The miracle of Shravasti rendered in a fresco. Cave 2, Ajanta.*

Following pages 52-53: *The pillars in cave 2, carved and painted, present a stunning sight even in a dimly lit arena.*

There is a badly damaged panel portraying an *apsara,* which is interesting for the coiffure and the neck ornaments sported by the lady.

Other panels narrate the *Mahakapi Jataka* and the *Shaddanta Jataka*. The Bodhisattva was once born as a monkey, and sacrificed his life by stretching himself across a perilous ravine so that his fellow monkeys, chased by soldiers, could cross the ravine using him as a makeshift bridge. On another occasion he was born as an elephant and he plucked out his own tusks to provide pleasure for a king's whimsical wife. This selfless act filled the queen with remorse, and led to her conversion.

The famous painting of the mother and child is seen in this cave. This is indeed one of the most moving pieces at Ajanta. This depicts the Buddha's visit to his place of birth and the encounter with his wife and child. The Buddha's feet rest on a white lotus blossoming from the ochre earth and his impressive head is painted against the night sky. The left hand holds up the robe and the right holds out his begging bowl. The lady Yashodhara wistfully looks at the face of the monk—her husband—with a hand resting gently on the shoulder of her young son, Rahul.

Scenes from the *Sharabha Mriga Jataka* and *Matriposhak Jataka* also adorn the walls of this cave. *Sharabha Mriga Jataka* tells us that the Buddha was once born as a deer who was pursued by the king of Varanasi during a hunt. The king accidentally fell into a deep pit and injured himself. Sharabh, the prey, rescued him without bearing him any malice. The *Matriposhak Jataka* tells of the time when he was born as an elephant to a blind mother. Captured by the king of Varanasi, he refused to eat or drink. He was ultimately released and joined his mother.

A gigantic composition on the rear wall displays the episodes from the *Simhala Avdana*. The merchant Simhala was shipwrecked and threatened by an ogress when washed ashore on an island. He was rescued by the Bodhisattva in the form of a horse. Riding this horse Simhala finally vanquished the ogress and founded a kingdom on the isle after his name. This panel is remarkable for its mastery of animated composition and exciting movement.

The much reproduced scene of the lady at her toilet is painted on the pilaster between the right and the front aisle. It is included in the list of masterpieces of Indian art. On the right front wall near the door are scenes from the *Nygrodh Jataka*. This *Jataka* tells us of the sacrifice made by the Bodhisattva in yet another deer manifestation to save a pregnant doe. This noble deed so moved the king of Varanasi that he decreed a reprieve for all creatures of the wild. The place where this drama took place became famous as the *mrig day* (deer park), the site where the Buddha was to preach his first sermon in another birth.

Manushi Buddhas. The panel underneath shows scenes from daily life of the people. The amorous couples in attractive setting became very popular in Indian painting. The inspiration came from Ajanta. Cave 17.

Facing page: *The Naga king with consort—a beautiful sculpture from Ajanta.*

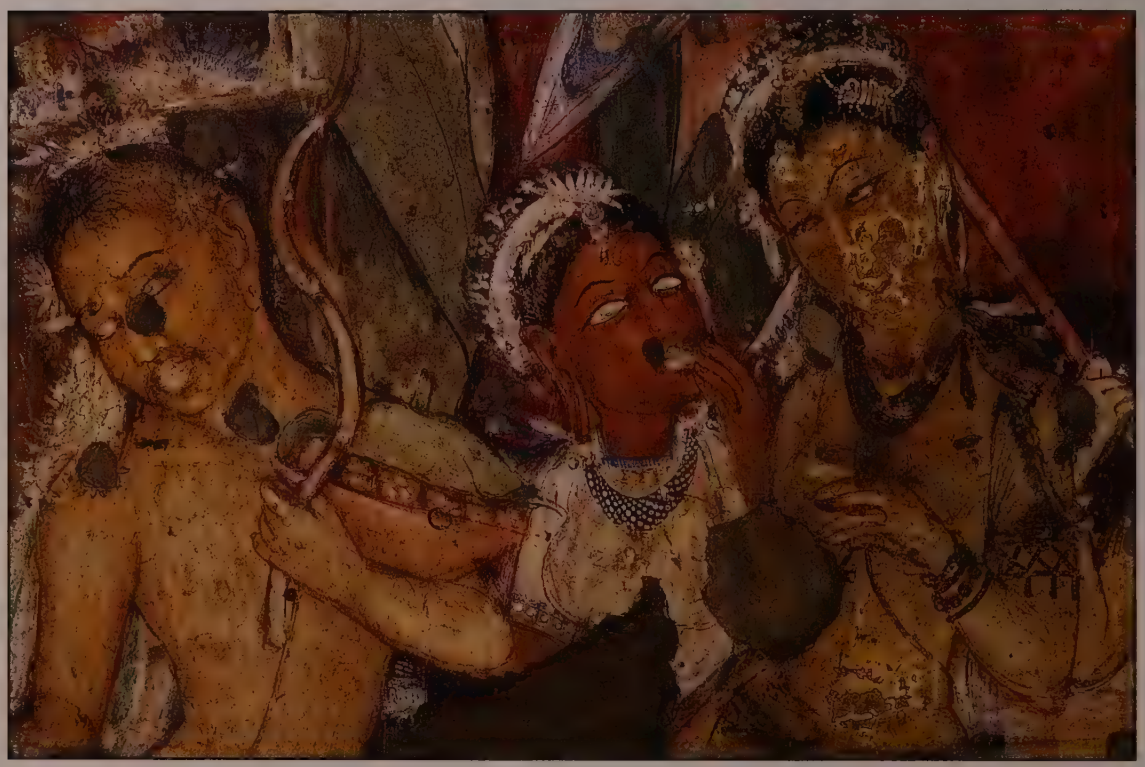
Following pages 56-57: *The Wheel of Life—pictorially representing the illusory nature of earthly existence. Cave 17, Ajanta.*

The wall also has scenes from the *Ruru Jataka*, which talks of the golden deer who was carried with great pomp in a chariot. Wilderness is presented dramatically in lush green thick foliage. Hunters—riding and on foot—and their dogs are painted against this realistic backdrop.

Cave 19 is comparatively small and seems to have been modelled after caves 9 and ten. It is visited for its rich carvings. This cave has a fully developed *chaitya* facade in Gupta style and forcefully proclaims, with an overabundance of Buddha images, the triumph of Mahayana Buddhism, affording a dramatic contrast to the earlier and more austere chambers carved in the Shunga period.

Cave 20, too, is distinguished for its carvings and the innovative arches of its lintel. These have been fashioned by trunks issuing out of dragons' mouths.

Cave 21 is severely damaged, the pillars and verandahs have crumbled, and the paintings all but faded. Some scholars have opined that this cave was left unfinished as the plaster at some places is untouched by paint. Caves 22 and 23 are also unfinished and find mention only for some curiosities. Cave 22 depicts seven manushi Buddhas, and cave 23 provides a record of a workman's life in some detail and is known as the Vishwakarma Cave. Vishwakarma is considered the patron sage of artisans and workers.



A small segment from a documentary panel showing a procession in the street with a beggar holding a crooked staff in his hand. Detail from Mahajanaka Jataka. *Cave 17, Ajanta.*

The theatrical lushness of Buddhist sculpture and painting, coinciding with an increase in Brahmanical sculpture, shows that the gods of Hinduism were now asserting themselves and offering a viable challenge to the Buddhist establishment. Not unlike the Roman Catholic Church in its reaction to the Reformation centuries later, Buddhism attempted to compete by beginning a transformation which would culminate in the medieval period with a flowering of esoteric Buddhism. Ultimately, Buddhism became so interwoven with Brahmanical practices that it is difficult to define the dividing line between the two.

All in all it is clear that the caves helped to create a tremendous mystic experience for the ancient pilgrim. Ajanta is indeed the rare and special flower of creative Indian imagination, a beauty that is enchantment.

Facing page: *Princes taking bath—detail. Cave 17, Ajanta.*
Following page 60: *King listening to the* Hansa Jataka*—detail. Cave 17, Ajanta.*
Page 61: *Visit of a foreign mission. Cave 17, Ajanta.*
Page 62: *Toilette of the Princess. Cave 17, Ajanta.*

Scene from Mahakapi Jataka *which relates the story of a great monkey who rescues a Brahman lost in the forest. Cave 17, Ajanta.*

ELLORA

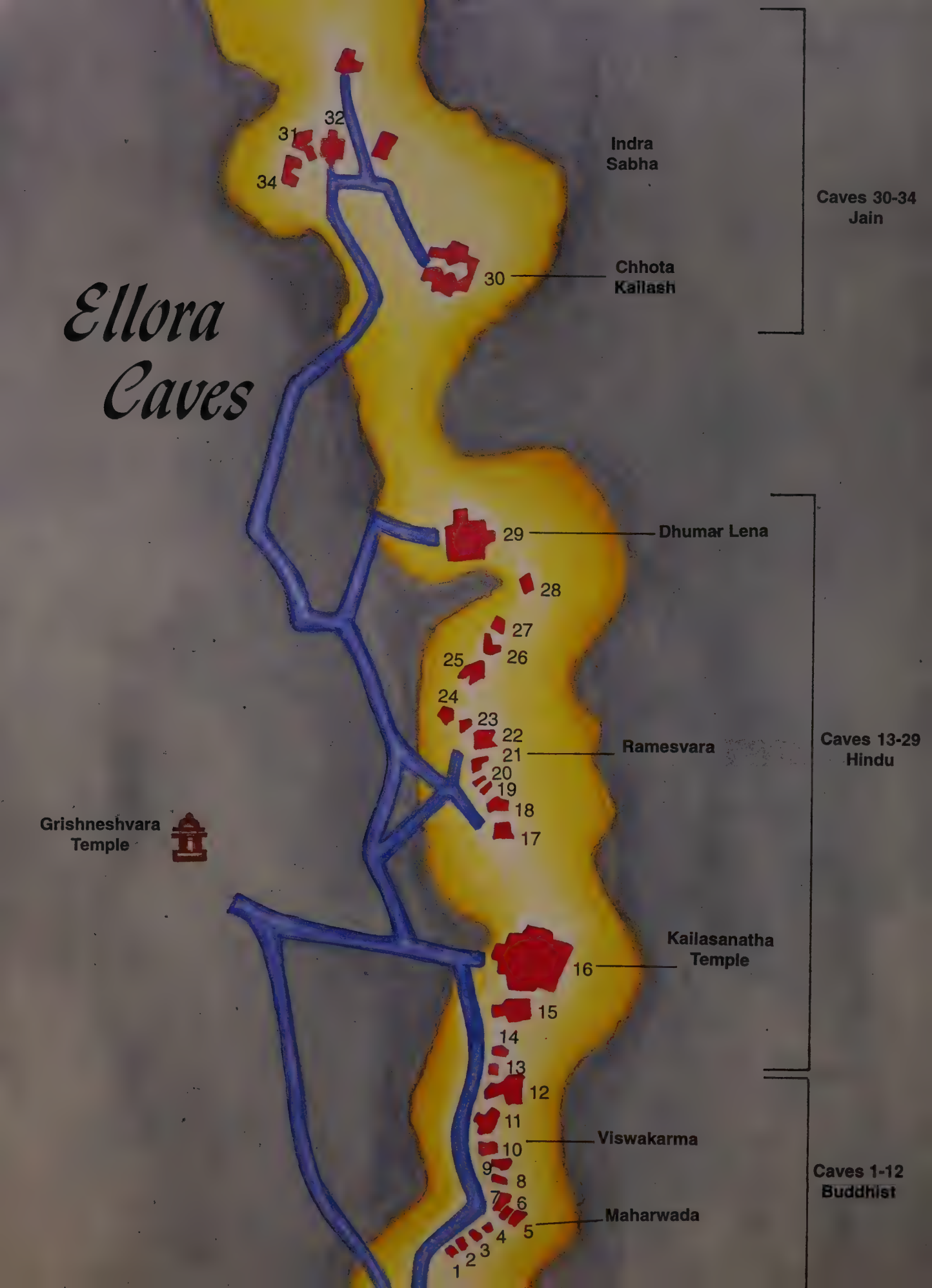
A little more than 25 kilometres away from Aurangabad lies Ellora, a place of pilgrimage for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains alike. It is ranked amongst the most magnificent of Indian sculptural sites. Ellora is derived from the ancient Elapura or Ilapura and was the capital of the dynasty of Rashtrakutas (7th to 9th century AD). In its more distant past the region was under the control of the Vakatakas and was the inheritor of the resplendent artistic traditions of Ajanta.

Chance and circumstance combined to make Ellora the richest repository of rock cut art in India. It presents a breathtaking spectrum of images commencing with Buddhist art, passing through the Brahmanical phase, and ending with the Jain faith. It has been with good reason termed the most monumental art legacy yet known of early Indian art.

The historical setting of Ellora temples is a drama in two acts—the Rashtrakuta and the Yadava—with the three century long interregnum of Chalukya rule. An inscription at the Dashavatara cave at Ellora clearly establishes that the Rashtrakuta king, Dantidurga, had conquered territories between the Narmada and the Tungbhadra rivers. The traditional enemies, the Chalukyas, were decisively crushed by Krishna I, his successor. He is the one who started the construction of the Kailashnath temple. His successors were preoccupied with subjugating the Deccan peninsula but did find time and resources to continue their ambitious building projects. Towards the end, the Rashtrakuta kings seem to have adopted Jainism and it was Amoghvarsha, who ascended to the throne in AD 814, who commissioned the Jain caves at Ellora.

The Rashtrakutas who built the major temples at Ellora were one of the most important rulers of ancient India in the post-Gupta period, and at one time their empire extended from the peninsular south to the Gangetic valley. They reigned for over two centuries, and although their origins are shrouded in obscurity, they have left voluminous epigraphical records documenting their military achievements. Krishna settled at Elapura, a place fit to be the abode of Shiva.

Krishna I was succeeded by many able successors—able warriors and generous patrons of the arts—but none was capable of emulating his achievements in war or peace. Nothing compares with the majesty of Kailashnath. A hundred


Ellora Caves
Indra Sabha
Chhota Kailash
Caves 30-34 Jain
Dhumar Lena
Ramesvara
Caves 13-29 Hindu
Grishneshvara Temple
Kailasanatha Temple
Viswakarma
Maharwada
Caves 1-12 Buddhist
1
2
3
4
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temples and sundry art pieces, it has been said, could not add much, but one Kailash speaks volumes about the might of the dynasty—and their fascination with grandeur. Everything the Rashtrakutas attempted was on an epic scale, their battles as well as their architecture.

A number of temples excavated from rocks at Ellora have their ceilings painted in panels. There are traces of paintings left on the ceilings of the Dasavatara and Dhumar temples, on the lintel and door jambs of the Kailash temple and on the walls of the three-storeyed excavation *(teen thal),* as well as on those of the Indrasabha temple. The paintings on the ceiling follow the architectural scheme of divisions. What was originally conceived as murals, laid out on the limitless expanse of the walls, were thus made to fit within bordered rectangular panels, not only on the ceilings but on the walls as well. The technique of preparing the ground for these murals was the same as that for Ajanta, and the colours too are similar: black, white, yellow, earth red and buff, all applied rather thinly and without any modelling.

The Themes

A great variety of subjects have been dealt with at Ellora. The approach of the artists was eclectic. The site was considered sanctified by the Buddhists, the Hindus and the Jains and figures from their myths and pantheon of gods are all generously represented.

The Buddha had forbidden his followers to worship him like a god but this did not inhibit them from paying homage to the places and objects associated with him. The Buddha did not leave behind any successor and the void left by him was difficult to fill. Relics of the Buddha—nails, hair and bones—were considered sacred as were the objects of his daily use such as his begging bowl, and his robes. Initially, the Buddha was represented only symbolically. It was only with the ascendancy of Mahayana Buddhism that the Buddha came to be represented in human form.

Jainism is as old as Buddhism. It derives the name from the word *jain*, one who has conquered temptations, weakness, overcome ignorance and vanquished all passions. This title is given to Lord Mahavira in whose teachings the doctrine of Jainism crystallised in the sixth century BC. However, Jains believe that Mahavira was preceded by 23 other prophets. It is important to remember that the *tirthankaras* are not considered incarnations of God, but are venerated as enlightened individuals, pointing out the path of salvation to others.

Not long after the death of Mahavira, differences arose amongst his followers. By the first century AD the ideological debate had become a schism. Most of the Jain *tirthankaras* are depicted without any garments in the icons.

Each *tirthankara* has a distinct symbol with which he is associated. The first *tirthankara,* Adinath has *vrishabh* (the bull), Neminath is associated with *shankh* (the conchshell), Parshvanath has the snake, and Mahavira the lion. Artistic conventions are scrupulously followed while depicting the *tirthankaras.* They are accompanied by a retinue of demigods—*yakshas* and *yakshis.* One can also see popular Hindu gods and goddesses like Ganesha, Lakshmi and others in attendance. The *tirthankara* when portrayed standing is upright with arms hanging down in the *kayotsraga* posture signifying renunciation. The seated image shows the *tirthankaras* in cross legged *padmasana,* considered suitable for meditation. The figures are always youthful, healthy and the face reflects beatitude or piercing, transcendent intelligence.

The presence of Shiva predominates at Ellora. He is depicted in his many forms—Pashupati—the lord of animals, Nataraja—the cosmic dancer, Dakshinamurty—the benign teacher and giver of bountiful gifts, and the supreme yogi. Shiva is represented usually in the form of a *lingam* (phallus), symbolising fertility.

The numerous post-Gupta age figures of Shiva, from different parts of India, are illustrative of various mythologies. The bewildering diversity in the anthropomorphic way of representing Shiva is all the more noteworthy when it is remembered that the principal object of worship, enshrined in the main sanctum, is almost invariably an iconic symbol.

Tripurantaka-murti and Andhakasurvadha-murti at Ellora represent examples of some of the finest specimens of Indian sculpture. These reach sublime heights of creation: the multi-handed icon effectively portrays the dynamic primal energy. It

has been noted that many of these images illustrate Vedic myths and their elaboration, relating to Rudra (the wrathful aspect of Shiva). The Kalari-murti of Shiva recounts how he chastised the god of death when he had tried to claim Markandeya, his devotee, while the youth was worshipping the lord. Gajasurasamhara-murti and the Kalari-murti are quite common amongst south Indian temples and those at Ellora are dramatically moving. Less common is the Kamantaka-murti—Shiva destroying Kamdev, the god of love, who had incurred his wrath by disturbing his austerities.

Shiva's Pashupati (lord of the animal kingdom) image harks back to the pre-Vedic Indus valley days. In other images he is shown holding a bow, clad in a tiger-skin, a coiled snake crowning him, recalling that among his many names are 'the celestial archer' and 'one dressed in tiger-skin'. He is often shown consorting with Parvati, the daughter of the mountain king, Himalaya. Shiva's favourite mount is Nandi, the bull. Kartikeya riding a peacock and the elephant-headed Ganesha are his two sons. Many of the cave temples at Ellora are adorned by icons of these deities.

Shiva is the timeless, universal spirit, *purusha*, and his various images strive to synthesise science, religion and art. His dance signifies rhythmic play as the source of all movement within the cosmos; the purpose of his dance is to release countless souls of men from the snare of illusion. Those who have fashioned the statues at Ellora were indeed *rishi*-artists who, according to art critic Anand Coomarswamy, afforded an image of reality, a key to complex issues of life, a theory of nature not merely satisfactory to a single clique or race, but universal in its appeal to the philosopher, the lover and the artist of all ages and all countries.

The caves at Ellora hewn in rock. These present a unique repository of ancient Indian art. The site was considered sacred by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains alike. This resulted in the building up of an exceptionally rich collection.

Hindus believe that Vishnu has manifested himself at different times in human or animal form to rid his devotees of the menace of oppressive demons, and many of the idols commemorate these occasions. Such manifestations are termed *avtars* and are numbered ten in all. The tenth *avtar,* Kalki, is yet to appear. Buddha is reckoned to be one of the manifestations of Vishnu. Of these incarnations, only six have been rendered by artists at Ellora.

Matsyaavtar recalls the time when Vishnu

Facing page: *Ambika statue from Ellora in Indrasabha cave.*

assumed the form of a giant fish to save mankind at the time of the primeval deluge. It was the great fish which steered the boat of Manu to the peak of Mount Meru which alone had escaped submersion in the devastating flood. This myth has a striking correspondence with the Biblical narrative of Noah and the ark.

Another incarnation was in the form of a boar who saved the earth by pulling it from the ocean bed and holding it up on his tusks, when it had been dragged by the demons. At Ellora, the earth is shown as a woman in distress, and the boar's head is placed on a human torso.

The Narsimhaavtar depicts Vishnu as the man-lion who appeared to destroy the cruel demon Hiranyakashyapu, who was torturing his own son, Prahlad, for his devotion to Vishnu. This demon had received a boon that he would not be killed by either a man or an animal. Nor could he lose his life either in the day or at night. As a matter of further insurance he had secured a boon that he could not be killed either indoors or outdoors. This is what forced Vishnu to manifest himself in this hybrid form. Hiranyakshyapu was clawed to death by Narsimha at dusk, on the threshold of his palace.

Then there is Vamanavtar showing Vishnu as a dwarf. Two of the most popular incarnations of Vishnu are as Ram and Krishna. Ram, the prince of Ayodhya, is the hero of the epic *Ramayana,* and is the famous destroyer of Ravana, the tyrannical king of Lanka, who had abducted his wife, Sita. Many episodes from the *Ramayana* form the subject matter of illustrations on the walls at Ellora. Krishna is recognised as the playful cowherd who had enamoured all the maids in his youth. An irrepressible prankster, he rebelled against all oppression, and later became the guiding spirit of Arjuna, the hero of the other Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata.* Scenes from this epic also enrich the sculptures at Ellora.

It is not only the consorts of Shiva and Vishnu—Parvati and Lakshmi—that are portrayed at Ellora; also found are those worshipped in their own right. Actually, the *sapta matrikas*—the seven mothers—are all taken to be the manifestations of the supreme mother, Durga. Kali is often shown with a protruding tongue and a trident in her hand. Durga in the form of the Mahishasurmardini, slayed Mahishasura (the buffalo demon). Some of these statues appear quite bizarre, and it is useful to keep in mind the observations of Anand Coomarswamy: 'To appreciate any art, moreover, we ought not to concentrate our attention upon its peculiarities—ethical or formal—but should endeavour to take for granted whatever the artist takes for granted. No motif appears bizarre to those who have been familiar with it for generations and in the last analysis it must remain beyond the reach of all these so long as it remains in their eyes primarily bizarre.'

Although this efflorescence is associated primarily with the ascendency of the Rashtrakutas, the art traditions were such that these bind together the people of four states in western and southern India—Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Ellora is an eloquent testimony to the fact that for about four centuries this was one religio-cultural, socio-political realm. The style reveals a basic cohesion, emphasising the fact that the artists did not lose their unity of vision despite the changing demands of powerful patrons. Unity is not to be confused with uniformity; what we witness is the crystallisation of a unique harmony.

The Caves

The Ellora caves are spread over a larger surface area than the Ajanta caves. A leisurely walk can be quite enjoyable, and as the caves are on a plateau, they afford a panoramic view of the surrounding plains.

There are 33 caves here and the excavations date from the end of the Gupta period to the 10th century, when they were completed under the patronage of the Rashtrakuta rulers. The Buddhists commissioned 12 caves, the Brahmins 17, and the rest are attributed to the Jains. Although there are striking similarities with the *chaityas* at Ajanta, the differences are significant.

The first of the Buddhist caves is simple, small and unpretentious, designed as a monastery, with just the bare necessities—a hall supported by pillars, with a verandah in front. Steps lead to the second cave which is a more ambitious affair. There is a square hall, with sides measuring 12 metres, and massive pillars. The guardian gatekeepers are the Bodhisattvas—Padmapani and Maitreya. These are attended upon by *gandharvas* and *apsaras* and the figures are suitably framed

by decorative patterns. There are galleries around the hall, with niches provided to hold images of the Buddha. The principal icon in this cave is of a seated Buddha.

Some of these caves were double-storeyed and inter-connected, like the fourth and the fifth caves. There are interesting innovations, such as a transverse vestibule separating the sanctum from the hall, and a row of elevated platforms running through the hall providing seats and work tables for the monks. In other caves, there are additional halls or cells. Cave 11 is three-storeyed, though it was considered double-storeyed until the discovery of another floor under the rubble.

Maitreya and Manjusri—as well as the different forms of the Buddhist goddess, Tara, are also seen in this cave. It has rightly been described as a veritable Buddhist pantheon.

Cave 10 is perhaps the most appealing of the Buddhist caves at Ellora. It is also called the Vishwakarma Cave, indicating its popularity among the artisans whose patron deity is Vishwakarma. Many scholars are of the opinion that the apsidal *chaitya* form first seen at Ajanta evolves fully here. The horseshoe-shaped window on the facade becomes circular. The friezes depicting hunting scenes and the decorative work on the pillar capitals is exceptionally attractive.

A Jaina cave at Ellora. The gatekeepers (dvarpala) *with arms stretched out display the* kayotsarga *posture signifying renunciation. The* tirthankara—*prophet, master—is seated in the lotus posture considered ideal for meditation.*

The 12th cave too is a three-tiered one, but differs from the other caves. There are rows of Buddhas meditating and preaching, manifesting different attributes. A row of eight pillars supports the main hall. The Buddha, turning the Wheel of Law, is flanked by two Naga figures. Another interesting sight is the row of seven Manushi Buddhas, the Enlightened One in human form. This theme was dealt with symbolically at Barhut. The seven Dhyani Buddhas are also represented here, Vairochan, Akshobhya, Ratnasambhav, Amitabh, Amoghsiddhi, Vajrasattva and Vajraraj. Various manifestations of the Bodhisattvas—

The typically vaulted *chaitya* ceiling is supported by male and female Naga figures.

The caves, built under Rashtrakuta patronage, obviously reflect their denominational preferences. The Rashtrakutas were devotees of Shiva and Shakti. Most of the cave shrines are dedicated to them, though other Hindu gods Vishnu in his many incarnations and lesser deities are also represented.

There are discernible differences in design. The Buddhist *chaityas* and *viharas* were meant to serve as assembly halls and monasteries while the Hindus built the abodes for their gods. These

were constructed to facilitate communion between the individual and his lord. Populated by majestic gods, human beings and animals—lions and elephants, exotic dwarfs, beautiful demigods, soldiers and dancers—Ellora is a realm of fantasy.

One of the major attractions at Ellora is cave 14 called *Ravana ki Khai,* a large hall supported by 16 pillars. The walls to the north and south have panels between pilasters. The first panel shows a four-armed Durga with one foot placed on a lion. The second displays the goddess as Gajlaxmi, seated on a lotus, being anointed by celestial elephants. The Varahavtar of Vishnu adorns the third panel, the divine boar upholding the earth on his tusks. Vishnu, with his consorts, and his favourite weapons, is depicted in the next two panels. Beyond this is a shrine with its gate guarded by the rivers Ganga and Yamuna. Graceful statues show the river goddesses on their favourite mounts, the crocodile and the tortoise. They are accompanied by dwarfs representing riches (*nidhi*). The panels continue beyond the gate. We encounter the *sapta matrikas* (seven mothers)—each shown with her vehicle or mode of transport—the bull, peacock, kite, boar, elephant, the lion and the owl. Ganesha is also seen here. The next five panels are devoted to Shiva. The first portrays the destruction of the demon of darkness, the second presents the famous scene of Ravana shaking Mt. Kailash, with Shiva and Parvati seated on it.

Following this are portrayals of Shiva as Nataraja, the cosmic dancer, gaily playing dice with Parvati. The final panel shows Mahishasurmardini, the goddess annihilating the buffalo demon.

Cave 15 is better known as the *Dasavatara* (ten incarnations). This, too, is a rich repository of sculptural treasures. It has been ascertained from an inscription found here that this cave dates back to the eighth century AD. The cave is double-storeyed and the shrine has idols of a two-armed Parvati, four-armed Vishnu, with his traditional attributes, and an attractive carving of Ganesha. Ganga and Yamuna once again act as the gatekeepers. On the first floor Shiva is depicted in many forms; as a dancer, playing dice, as a bridegroom, Kalyansundar, granting the boon of eternal youth, and defying death. He is also shown as Gangadhar, arresting the destructive fury of the tempestuous river during her descent from the heavens. The walls of the ante chamber are decorated with carvings of Ganesha, Kartikeya, and Gajalaxmi. The panels in the main hall also show the six incarnations of

Kailash temple at Ellora with Nandi the favourite mount of Shiva in the courtyard. Shiva is predominant at Ellora. The rock cut temple constantly reminds one of the celestial mountain abode of Shiva, Mt. Kailash.

Vishnu, astride the celestial eagle Garuda, as Krishna raising mount Govardhan to save his devotees from the torrential rains unleashed by a malicious Indra reclining on the great serpent Sheshnag, also as Vaman the dwarf, Varah the boar and Narsimha the man-lion.

Many of these caves are aesthetically satisfying but the undisputed masterpiece is the Kailashnath temple in the 16th cave. This is a gigantic, monolithic structure carved out of sheer rock. The Kailashnath temple at Ellora imitates the Virupaksha temple at Pattadakkal, which shrine in turn is inspired by, and copies, the Kailash temple at Kanchi. The creative fusion of concentrated power and heaviness of form, with ease, grace and suppleness, results in mighty carvings of forceful movement and noble and dignified elegance. The sculptures at Ellora seem to burst forth into intense activity. The figures arch forward, as in the *Mahishamardini* relief, or are entwined in rapturous embrace as in the *mithuna* (amorous couples) relief, or display great strength, as in the scene of Ravana shaking Kailash. Even when they are at ease, as in the Shiva-Parvati scene or in the river-goddess reliefs, they retain an attitude of dignified command, and while flying exhibit an active and conscious effort at speed.

The Kailash temple at Ellora is twice the size of the Virupaksha temple. The massive dimensions of this edifice have a dramatic impact. It has been estimated that almost two million cubic feet of rock was excavated to build this temple. Assuming that four cubic feet of rock was cut by one person, it must have taken 250 workers about five and a half years to dig three large trenches in the hill to isolate the mass of rock. Carving began as soon as a sufficiently large rock face was available. The work progressed from front to rear and from ceiling to floor. Decoration and finishing were done simultaneously to avoid the use of scaffolding.

Buddha statues in a row in contemplative posture.

The whole project probably took a little over 12 years. There are many panels at Kailash which do not conform to what may be termed as the Rashtrakuta idiom of sculpture. They display the traits of the Chalukya school. Other specimens reflect a Pallav influence. This, it is speculated, is the result of Chalukya and Pallav artists being employed in this task.

Passing through the *gopuram,* the high-towered

Following pages 72-73: *Marriage of Shiva and Parvati. A rare example depicting Shiva as Panigrahi—the bride-groom ritually accepting the bride by holding her hand.*

entrance, we reach the shrine of Nandi—the bull-mount of Shiva. On either side of the massive bull are carved life-size elephants, with awe inspiring panels on either side. One panel depicts Ravana shaking Mount Kailash, and a terrified Parvati seeking solace in Shiva's embrace. The attendants are running helter skelter. Different incarnations of Vishnu and personifications of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna decorate the outer walls. The gigantic *dhwajstambha* fashioned out of a single rock is most imposing. Behind the *lingam* is placed the *trimurti* (three-faced) idol of Shiva, resembling the one at Elephanta. Amongst the other beautiful carvings are the Nataraja, Mahishasurmardini and Ardhnarishvar (the hermaphroditic representation of Shiva). Beyond lies the main shrine—the columned assembly hall, the sanctum, and the tower over it—the *shikhara*. The *shikhara* rises almost 1,200 feet over the *lingam*—the phallic representation of Shiva.

To reach the main temple, devotees have to climb a short flight of stairs from the courtyard. This accentuates the experience of progressing upwards, ascending to heaven from the stony bowels of earth. Some idea of the grandeur of the building can be had from the dimensions of the courtyard—276 feet by 154 feet. At the back the hill drops 120 feet vertically from the verandah. The edifice of Kailashnath is so awe inspiring that the surrounding buildings and sculptures pale into insignificance. This is unfortunate as many of these are of great artistic merit—original in conception and exquisitely executed. The little figures sculptured in stone appear to glow and move with the shifting rays of the sun.

Shiva is depicted in many impressive poses: destroying a demon elephant, wielding a bow, practising austerities or dancing exuberantly. Shiva keeping the ten-headed demon Ravana in control by pressing his toe firmly in the ground, is a famous iconic image. On the panels surrounding the main shrine are depicted scenes from the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

The many panels in the temple provide an illustration of Shaivite lore. In one place Shiva is seen emanating from a *lingam,* granting boons to his devotees. The Baroda copper plate inscription eulogising the Rashtrakuta king, Krishna I, does not exaggerate when it claims that the gods moving in the sky were astonished by his magnificence.

Cave 21 is famous for two most impressive reliefs of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna. Ganga is

Dancing Shiva. The sculpted images at Ellora are remarkable for their plasticity and lyricism. The artists at work constantly strove to improvise on a popular theme and have rendered many equally attractive variants.

Facing page: *Shiva as demon slayer: detail.*

shown standing on a crocodile and Yamuna astride a turtle. The celestial rivers are accompanied by *gandharvas,* dwarfs and decorative foliage and floral patterns. Critics have gone into raptures describing these figures.

The facade of this cave is adorned with erotic couples, human and animal figures. The scene depicting the penance of Parvati is very sensitively wrought. The beautiful daughter of Himalaya desired to marry Shiva, and the gods sent Kama, the Hindu god of love, to arouse passion in the heart of the arch ascetic. Full of wrath at being disturbed while practising austerities, Shiva reduced Kama to ashes.

Cave 29 too shows the marriage of Shiva, attended by many Hindu gods on their mounts: Indra on the fabulous white elephant Airavata; Yama, the god of death, on the fierce buffalo; Vishnu on the swift eagle, Garuda; the fire god, Agni, on a goat; and Vayu, the ruler of the winds, riding a stag. Shiva himself is portrayed in one of his more awesome, terrifying moods, as Bhairav or dancing the destructive *tandav* dance.

The Jain caves mark the last phase in construction at Ellora. Amoghvarsha, the Rashtrakuta king, was a patron of Jainism, and is believed to have commissioned the construction of these caves. Cave number 30 is well known as Chhota Kailash, and is considered a replica of the Kailashnath temple. The *gopuram* does not bear any resemblance to the original, but many of the carvings on the walls are quite attractive. There are images of seated *tirthankaras,* and the portico, supported by decorated pillars, is interesting. On either side of the *toran*—the arch over the main gateway—are placed the idols of Parshvanath and Gommateshvara, the Jaina saints.

Two other caves are interesting. Famous as the Indrasabha, cave 32 has a miniature, Dravidian style temple, complete with a *dhwaja stambha* (the flagpole). The many niches are decorated with icons of *tirthankaras,* Jain masters who preceded Mahavira. The carvings are intricate and delicate. Some images of Hindu gods like Indra are also included. This perhaps is the most beautiful of Jain caves. Gommateshavara here brings to mind the huge statue at Shravanbelgola where Parshvanth is shown overcoming Kamath (personifying evil in Jain mythology). A magnificent lotus decorates the ceiling, and vestiges of paintings can be seen. Other exquisite carvings include the demigod Matanga riding his elephant, and Ambika on a lion.

The next cave is similar though slightly smaller. The principal icon is that of Lord Mahavira, and there are portraits and narrative scenes similar to the Indrasabha cave.

Shiva portrayed as the cosmic dancer.
Facing page: *The abduction of Sita by Ravana—a crucial episode from the Hindu epic,* Ramayana.

CONCLUSION

Ajanta and Ellora occupy a very significant place in the evolution of Indian architecture. Ajanta marks a distinct stage in the transition from wood to stone and Ellora leads the way in marking the transition from the cave shrines of Ajanta to structural temples, displaying a fine blending of ideas not confined to architectural techniques. The talented sculptors made the basaltic rock of the Satpura soft and malleable as soap under their chisels. The magic wrought by them made the minds of men also more receptive. All the major cults and sects coexist happily at Ellora—Brahmanic, Buddhist, Jain, Saiva, Vaisnava and Sakta. This effortless harmonisation is reflected in the buildings. What became famous as the *viman* style (the spire soaring skyward) and is identified with the south Indian temples is admixed here with the *rekha* or the curvilinear style. It has been rightly observed that Ellora represents, better than any other site, the dazzling diversity and richness of the entire south Indian architectural and sculptural inheritance. The aesthetic sensibility as well as the technical excellence are unique.

It has been suggested that the artists at Ajanta and Ellora were concerned with the order of sensuousness, as distinct from the order of reason. In this spontaneous reflection of the world everything is simultaneous and exists in an eternal present. The eye is subtly prevented from perceiving this simultaneity and the truth, when revealed, strikes with great force. The cave art appeals to all the senses simultaneously and emphasises directly apprehending anything of significance. This environment demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being.

It is interesting to note that the tender humanism and the profound nature sympathies which are so conspicuous in the paintings of Ajanta and sculptures of Ellora are also recognisable in the works of poets like Ashvaghosha and dramatists like Kalidas. The lyricism of deeply felt experience is resonant in the subtle drawings that seem to pulsate with latent energy. There is a gentle acceptance of life and death amidst the gay celebration of life. The portrayal of a life of plenty reflects the material riches increasing through greater world trade. Interestingly, this does not bring to surface any ugly conflicts: an epic harmony is communicated in efflorescence. As noted writer Mulk Raj Anand has remarked, sensibility and imagination are interchangeable here as are individuals and symbols. Fantasy is not escape but liberation. The challenge of protecting and preserving this invaluable heritage continues to confront us.

Flying gandharvas—*celestial beings famous for their musical prowess.*

Facing page: *Serene face of Buddha whose presence is powerfully felt at Ajanta and Ellora. Cave 1, Ajanta.*

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Ajanta & Ellora—grand, mysterious and awe-inspiring. These cave temples, located in a horseshoe-shaped hillside in Maharastra, contain some of the world's most beautiful paintings and sculptures on their walls. Nameless artisans of another age in one creative burst of energy shaped these incomparable works of art which encompass Buddhist, Hindu and Jain beliefs. This book's lucid text and vivid photographs explain some of the mystique of these caves.

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